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The effect of embedded academic literacy activities on student writing in a distance learning module

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Abstract

Academic literacy (AL) is widely considered as central to academic knowledge building and success (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Snow, 2010; Woodward-Kron, 2002). Evidence also indicates that AL may pose challenges to many students at risk of underachievement (Cummins, 2014). Given the disciplinary variation and associated AL practices (Haneda, 2014), early childhood studies is distinct from other disciplines. However, it is recognised that not all students come to higher education equipped with it and often students are blamed for this (Wingate, 2018). Importantly, there is limited evidence of how embedding AL in a discipline such as early childhood studies supports first year students (cf. Veitch, Johnson, & Mansfield, 2016). This paper, which relates to the conference theme of Curriculum Development, reports on an exploratory study examining Early Childhood degree students' perspectives on the effect of embedded AL activities (e.g., constructing an academic argument, designing an essay introduction) on their academic writing.

The study context was a collaboration between an AL specialist and a team of early childhood studies academics to innovate an early childhood course. The research involved a mixed methods approach with the aim of supporting the corroboration of findings. Data gathering was sequential (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2009) with the main focus on generating qualitative data initially and quantitative information at the final stage. The data was drawn from student interviews (15 transcripts), an online survey (35 responses) and written assignments (30 scripts). The five student interviews were conducted by an independent researcher after they completed the second, fourth and final assignment. The written assignments were collected from the interviewees soon after each interview. The survey was administered at the end of the course. The student interviews were thematically analysed using an approach informed by grounded theory (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2008) while the written assignments were examined through a genre analysis approach drawing on Martin and Rose (2008).

The findings reveal that students were engaged in AL activities which had positive impacts on their self-confidence in writing assignments and in their professional communication, and their knowledge about AL. The analysis of the student assignments indicated students' growing understanding of the core AL skills and knowledge introduced in the module as evidenced in their assessed writing. This study has implications for designing a subject curriculum which aims to develop both disciplinary knowledge and AL to understand and communicate such knowledge. Equally, it provides further insights into disciplinary writing pedagogy.

Overview

- Rationale for researching academic literacy
- Previous research on embedded academic literacy
- Research questions
- Research context
- Data collection tools
- Data analysis tools
- Key findings
- Conclusions and implications



Rationale for researching academic literacy

- Definition of academic literacy (AL): ‘the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing’ (Wingate, 2018, p. 340)
- Vital role of AL in constructing subject knowledge (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Snow, 2010; Woodward-Kron, 2002)
- Low-achievers with little AL at a higher risk (Cummins, 2014)
- Recognised disciplinary variations (Haneda, 2014)
- Need for discipline focused and embedded AL

Previous research

- Limited research reported on embedded AL
- Those reported showing positive impacts on students' academic writing:
 - Skinner and Mort (2009) – electrical engineering;
 - Wingate, Andon, and Cogo (2011) – applied linguistics;
 - Black and Rechter (2013) – sociology
 - Murray and Nallaya (2016) – arts & teacher education
 - Veitch, Johnson, and Mansfield (2016) – teacher education
- Yet none in distance learning context and on early childhood studies, thus warranting research

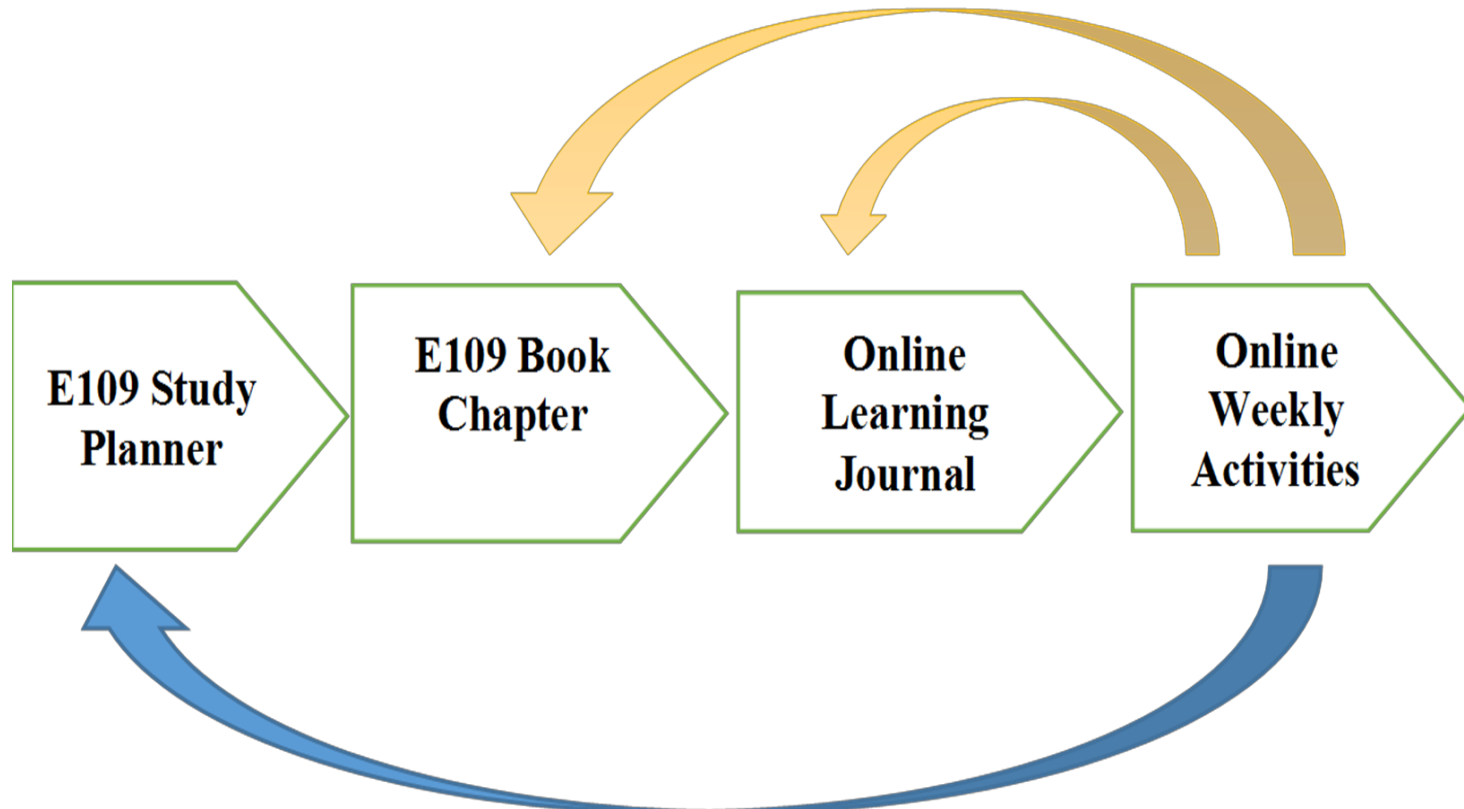
Research questions

- What are the early childhood studies students' perceptions about the effect of embedded academic literacy activities on their assessed academic writing?
- What is the effect of embedded academic literacy activities on these students' assessed academic writing as evidenced by a genre analysis?

Research context (1)

Distance Learning- First Module in first year of an Early Childhood Degree

E109 weekly study cycle



Student Cohort

- Usually averages around 450 students
- Open access, requiring no formal qualifications
- For many a return to study for first time since school

Typical breakdown (one tutor group)

	Count
1 No Formal Qualifications	1
2 Less than A Levels	11
3 A Levels or equivalent	17
4 HE Qualification	3
6 Not known	3

Research context (3)

Weekly online activities

Usually four in total: interactive; one based on AV material; one academic literacy skills focus

Academic literacy skills activities broadly incremental

Academic literacy skills activities to build and support assignment completion

Academic literacy skills contextualised using text from teaching materials and thus subject focused

Research context (4)

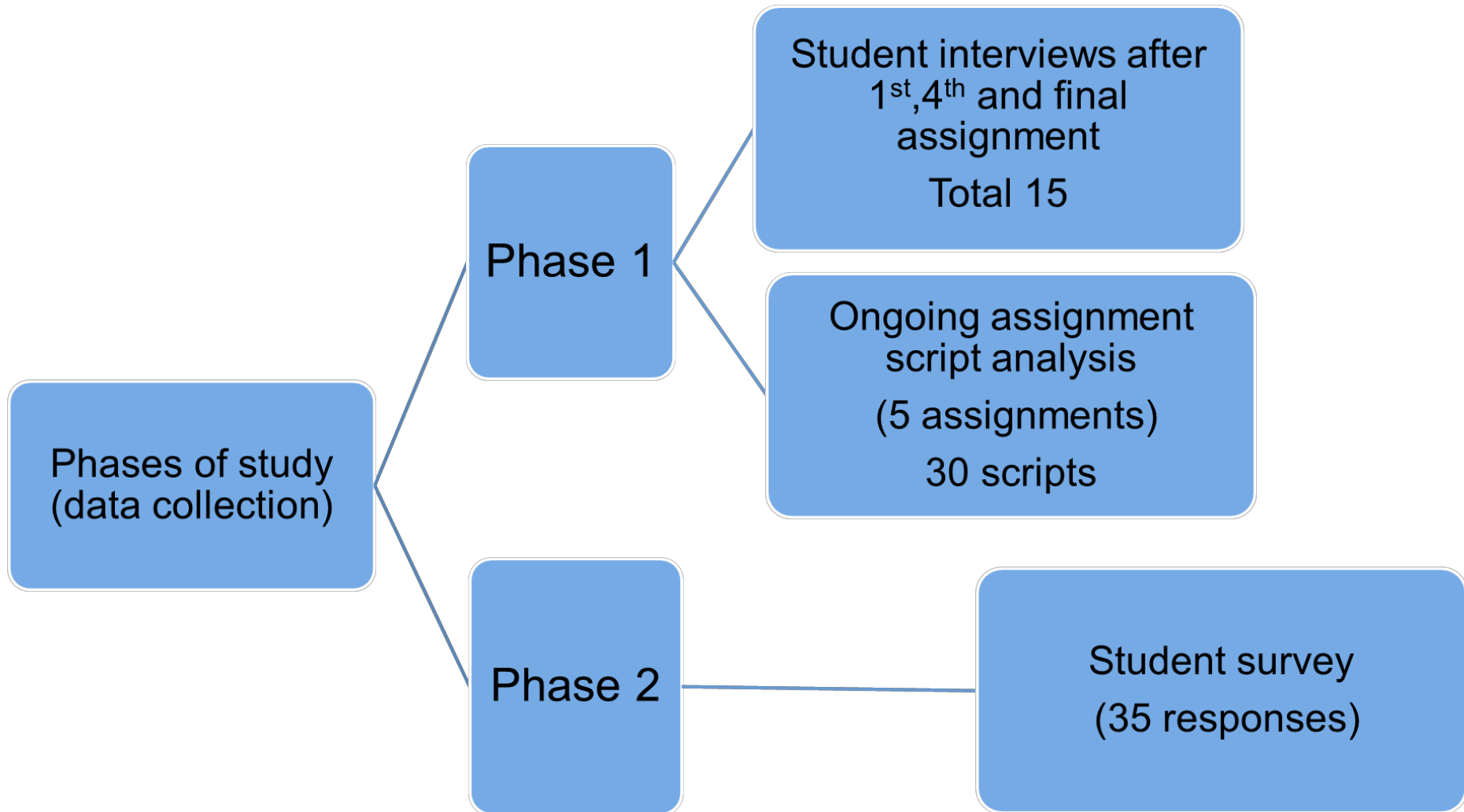
Weekly online activity examples

Week 1	Activity 1.4 How to make notes from a chapter.
Week2	Activity 2.4 Using linking words to join sentences and to make a paragraph.
Week3	Activity 3.4 How paragraphs work-the connection between a paragraph and a main topic.
Week4	Activity 4.4 Writing a summary from notes and how to join paragraphs to give writing a sequence.
TMA 01	Study skills required : write two paragraphs on a given topic

Methodology

- A mixed method approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004)
Semi-structured interviews with students and tutors
Student survey
Assignment script analysis
- Disjunctive mixed method concept (Mathison 1988, Howe 2011)
Quantitative/ exploration Qualitative/ explanation
- Sequential mixed method approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004)
Phase 1-qualitative data/ micro level
Phase 2-quantitative/ macro level

Data collection

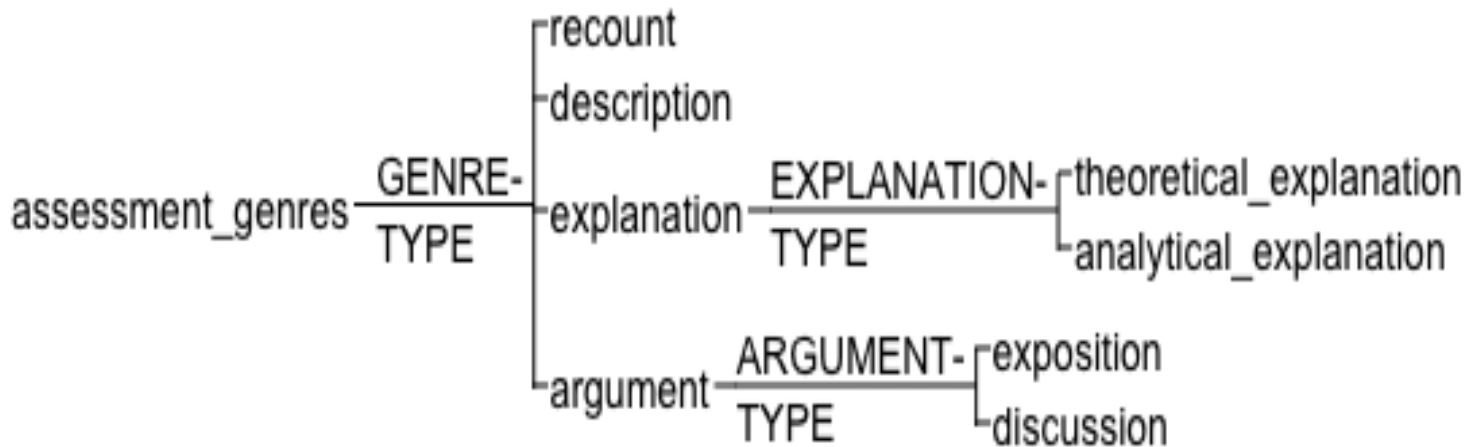


Data analysis (1)

- Student interview data – iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Student survey data - statistical analysis
- Students' written assignments – genre analysis informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2008; Nesi & Gardner, 2012)
 - Genre: 'staged, goal-oriented social processes' (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 6)

Data analysis (2)

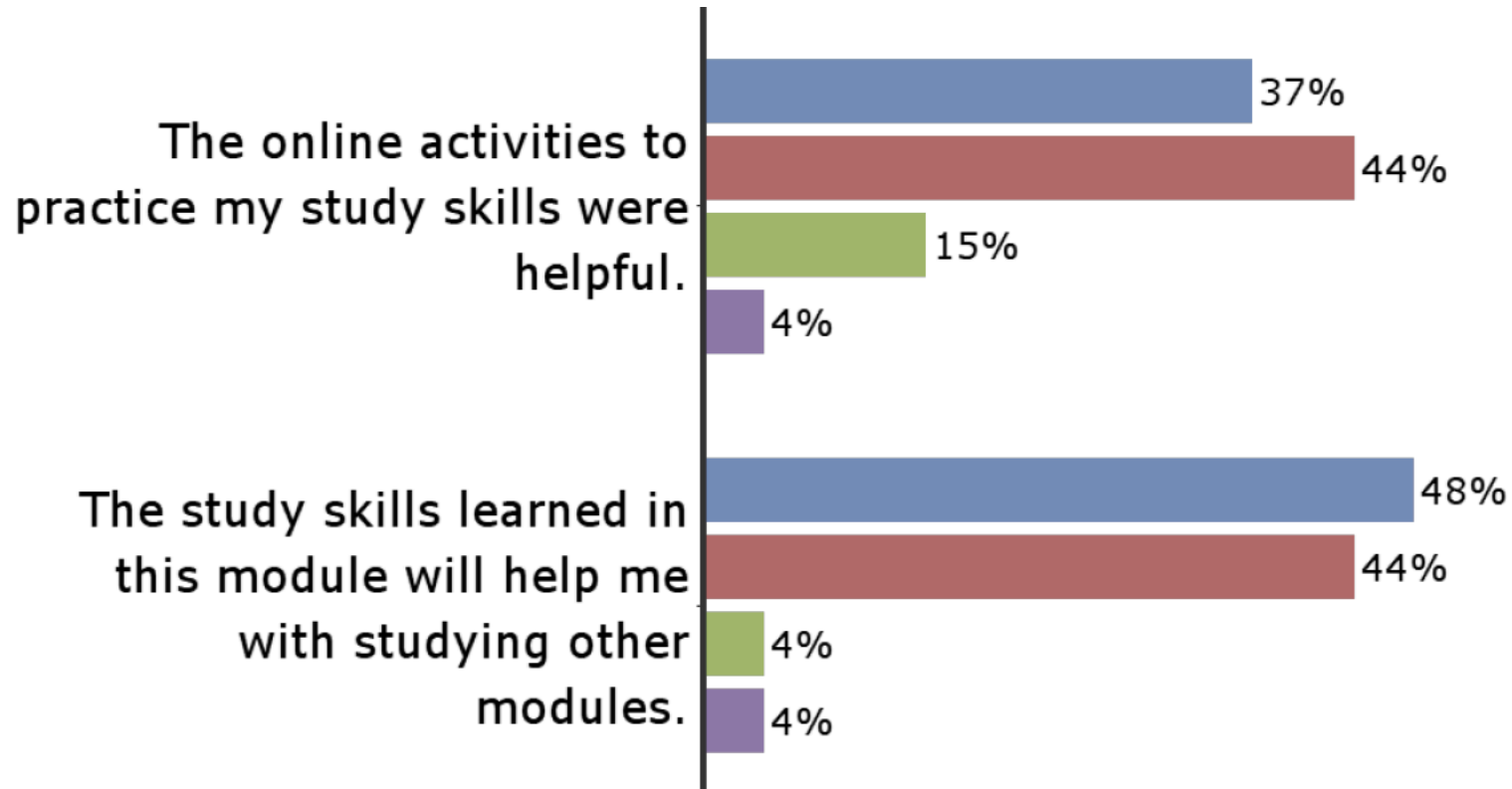
Genres in Early Childhood degree module (E109) assessment



E.g., Explanation: Definition/ Explanation ^ Significance
^ Application

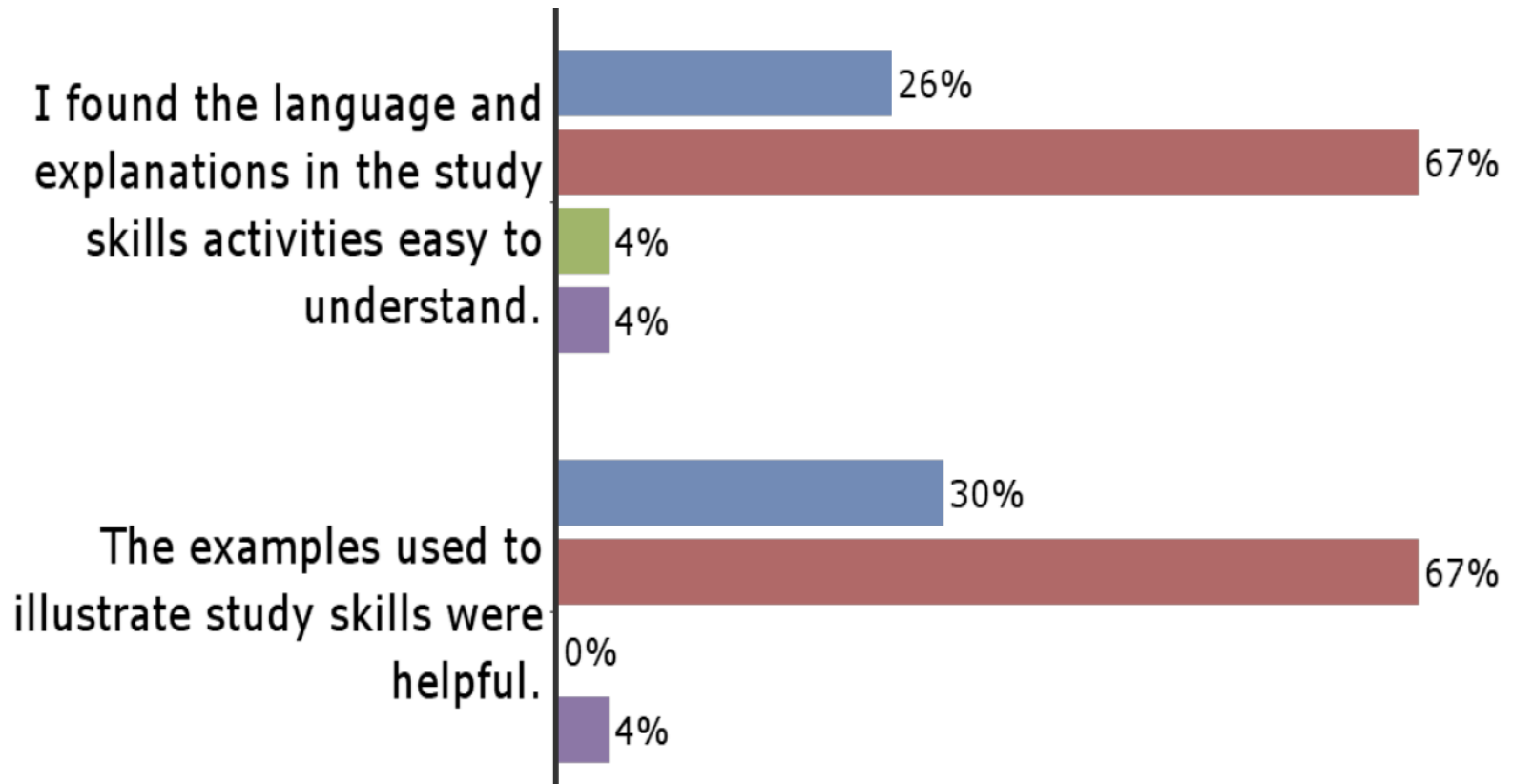
Key findings

Overview of effectiveness



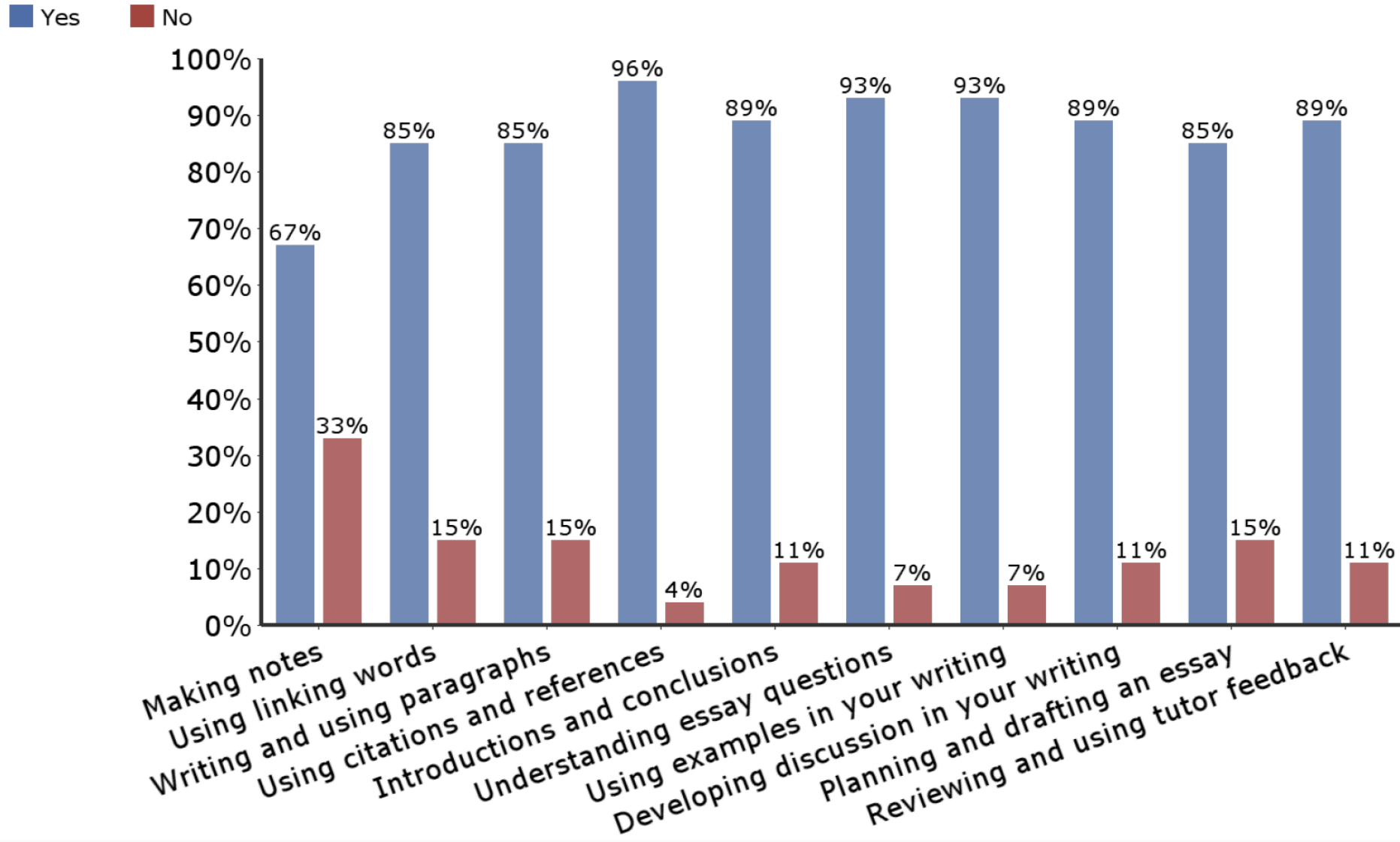
Key findings

Connection with subject material



Key findings

Useful areas of learning



Key findings: Interview theme 1

Connection with their key concerns

And what I needed to put in especially with – I struggle with the introductions a bit so yes I did look at that – the introduction bit and I got hopefully what I needed to put in – I still don't think I put enough in but I think I've got it more or less how I wanted it to be – if you can see what the question was aimed at.

Student 1

That was the planning and the content words where we looked at all the different meanings of the words so what describes what summaries meant what illustrate meant – that helped me out and I printed that page off!

Student 4

Key findings: Interview theme 2

Developed confidence as a writer

Yes loads more confident – I was a bit, about half way through I was a bit shaky I suppose but now I don't feel like I can do – I sat down and did my EMA, my time was limited this time because of my son's dad having to go but I actually managed to sit down and writing and it didn't take me hours and hours and hours. Student 5

Over the course of this module! I was really anxious when I first started about my academic writing abilities – I struggle quite a bit with punctuation and grammar – I think that was probably a weakness of mine, and also being out of any academic studies at the beginning of the module made me feel quite nervous and going into my EMA I felt so much more confident really in my abilities which was lovely – I didn't feel like that when I first started so it was nice to feel that while doing my EMA – sort of gosh look how far I've come and I see that in my writing so that was very nice – so yeah I think definitely it's improved above all recognition! Student 3

Key findings: Interview theme 3

Reasons for effectiveness

- Frequency and regularity a key factor
- Pitching at the right level
- Relevance to assessment tasks
- Activities integral and involving writing about the subject area
- Activities varied and interactive
- Activities involving self checking and including model responses
- Completed activities used as ongoing resources
- Integral design allowing for quick and easy revision when required

Key findings: Interview theme 4

Reasons for effectiveness

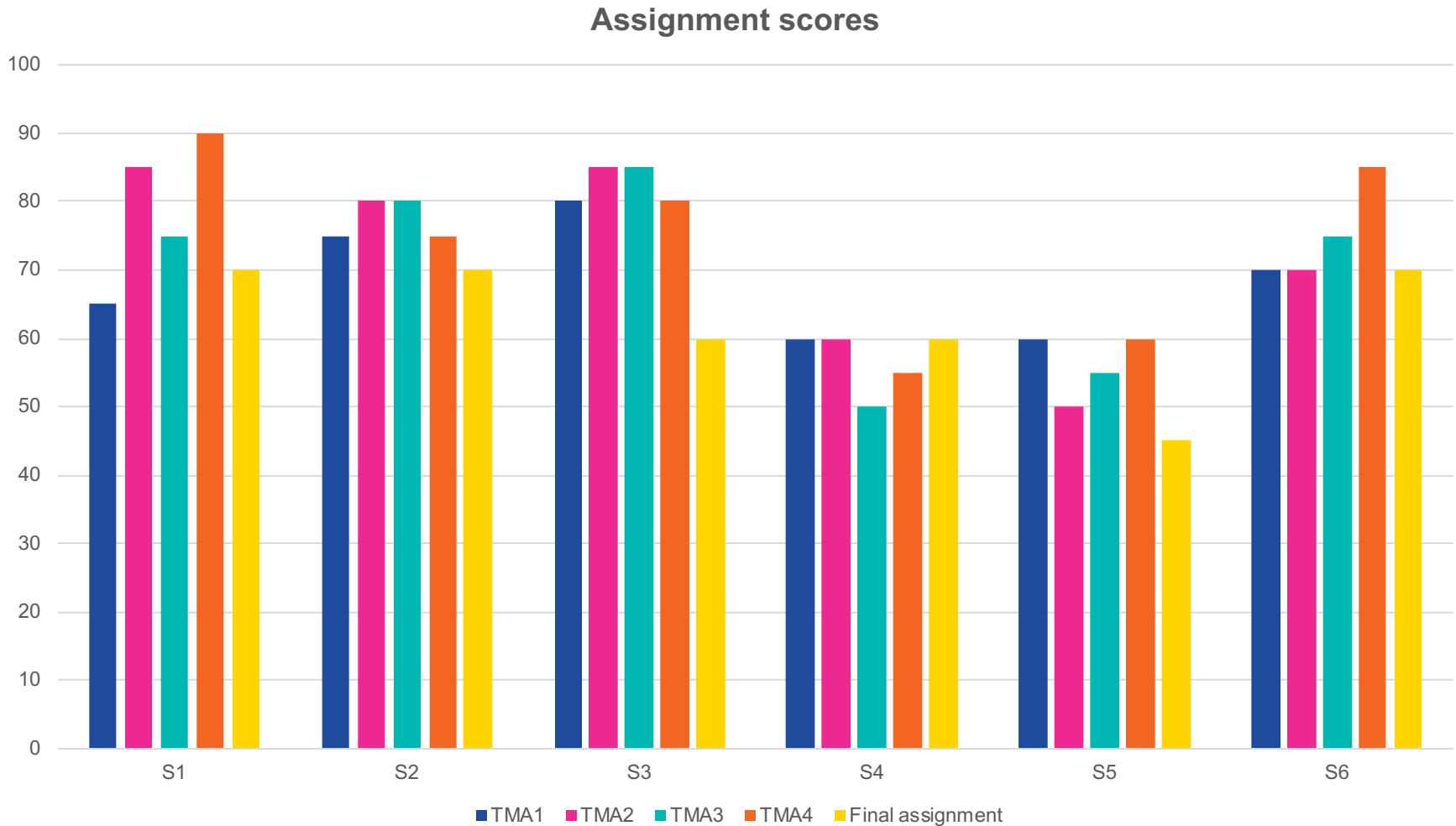
It is stretching me in the right way – the information is there and it's not hidden and it's not embedded somewhere where you cannot find it....Student 2

I think the best way that I found of doing it was looking at the activities and was it relevant to me, was it really going to help me if I haven't got time then if not I can always come back to it or if I've got loads of time I'll do them later or I will do all of them? I mean I suppose that's one of the really good things is that you can go back at any point to them can't you, that's great! Student 3

There is two lots of knowledge that you are learning really, you are learning more about the childcare and learning more about the approach to the subject the academic writing and how to write. Student 4

Key findings

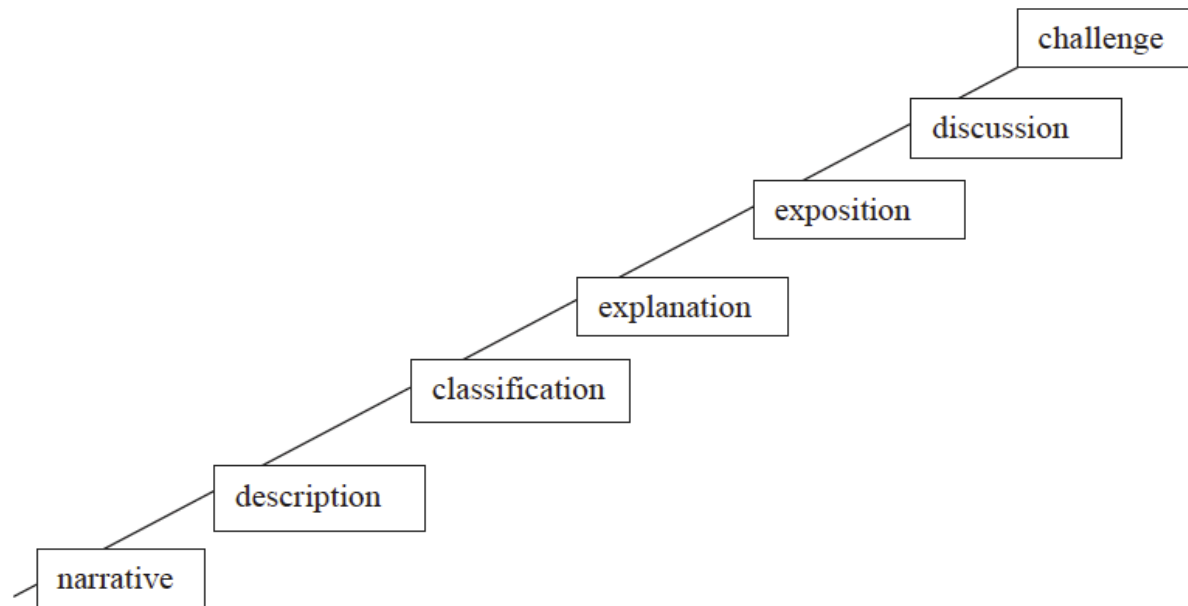
Assignment scores of six students



Key findings: genre analysis

A mixed picture of students' academic writing based on scores

Assignment genres moving from more descriptive to argumentative as the subject knowledge developed in the module



(Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 157)

Key findings: genre analysis

Assignment 1 (TMA1)

Task	Prompted genre	Academic literacy skills taught
<p>Question 1</p> <p>Write two paragraphs (250 words each) explaining two different ideas that have been of particular interest to you from studying Chapters 1–4. (500 words in total)</p>	<p>Explanation</p> <p>Description/ Definition ^</p> <p>Significance ^</p> <p>Application</p>	<p>Using paragraphs</p> <p>Summarising</p>

Key findings: genre analysis

Extracts from Assignment 1: S1 and S4

S1

Socio- Cultural Perspectives

I found **socio-cultural view** interesting as we are focused on the children's development using the milestones, to ensure that they are on track and what we should be working on next but we do not look at what the child may already know. **Socio-cultural perspective looks at the influences of the child's environment and relationships which sometimes the maturationism and constructivism perspectives over look.** From birth the child's upbringing will be influenced by the parent's culture and experiences they offer the child. For example, ... [...]

S4

Part A: Attachment and belonging

Children develop and learn from their social and cultural environment. Early years of a child life may be spent with close family members that are centred within the community in which they live and therefore the child will interact within and outside a family circle, creating a network of friendships whilst establishing a **sense of belonging.**

Attachment and belonging looks at how children form relationships before birth and beyond. For example ... [...]

Key findings: genre analysis

Generic stages of S1's and S4's Assignment 1 (Task 1)

S1	<p>Genre: Explanation</p> <p>Concept 1: sociocultural perspectives</p> <p>Orientation ^ Explanation ^ Definition/ Description ^ Exemplification (Recount) ^ Significance/ Application of concept (linking to assignment task)</p>
S4	<p>Genre: Description + Explanation</p> <p>Concept 1: Attachment and belonging</p> <p>Description [does not link with assignment task] ^ Exemplifying ^ Definition? ^ Exemplification ^ Significance ^ Application/ Exemplification ^ Action</p>

Key findings: genre analysis

Assignment 4 task

Tasks	Prompted genre	Academic literacy skills taught
<p>Question 2</p> <p>Write an essay answering the question: What are some of the key elements that make a positive learning environment for young children, and why are they important? (1500 words)</p>	<p>Macrogenre:</p> <p>Analytical</p> <p>Explanation + Exposition</p> <p>Elements ^</p> <p>Explanation</p> <p>Position ^</p> <p>Argument ^</p> <p>Reinforcement of position</p>	<p>Making notes</p> <p>Using linking words</p> <p>Using paragraphs</p> <p>Summarising</p> <p>Using citations and references</p> <p>Writing Introductions and conclusions</p> <p>Answering a question</p>

Key findings: genre analysis

Extracts from Assignment 4: S1 & S4

S1

Introduction

The three elements I will be discussing for creating a positive learning environment, which benefits children's well-being and inclusion, are **allowing children to take risk, making space for imagination** when using open-ended resources and **providing activities that allow all children to be included**. I will explain how each of the elements contributes to creating a positive learning environment with examples and considering **the challenges** that can arise when trying to put these elements into practice.

The first element that **I feel** contributes to making a positive learning environment for young children is **allowing children to take risks**. It is important because as children need to learn how to assess and manage risk for their own well-being as a life skill and the best way for them to do this safety is within play. [...]

S4

Essay

This essay will discuss three key elements that make up positive learning environments for children and the areas of discussion are; **allowing children to make decisions, planning activities that allow inclusive practice and Digital learning experience**. Key areas of discussion will be supported by evidence from the reader materials and the conclusion of the essay will summarise the areas of discussion.

Firstly the essay will discuss the importance of **allowing children to make decisions**. Allowing children to make decisions in every aspect of their learning experience is very important because it allows children to feel valued and respected but also gives them a sense of independence.

Key findings: genre analysis

Conclusions in S1's and S4's assignment 4

S1

Conclusion

I have discussed three key elements that make a positive learning environment for young children and given at least two examples for each element, explaining how it can promote children's well-being and inclusion. I have looked at the benefits of each element and explored the difficulties that practitioners may encounter when trying to implement into practice. I have learnt the importance of embracing risky play with the children and allowing space for imagination when using open-ended resources to aid in developing their own well-being and I have a clearer understanding that inclusion involves all children and is something that continually needs reflecting and evaluating in practice.

S4

In conclusion the idea of technology is not about technicality side of things but rather its use in order to connect with peers, families and wider communities, help give traditional stories like fairy tale new meaning. Allowing children to make choices in regards to their learning environment and choices of activities that they engage in and provide them with a place in which they can use for relaxation and retreat are all important aspects of creating positive learning which is good for their health and wellbeing. It is also proven that when planning activities and an environment that promotes inclusion can be very beneficial to children putting aside individual differences practice without prejudices and assumptions allows children to be valued and respected irrespective of their gender disability or ethnicity.

Key findings: genre analysis

Generic stages of S1's and S2's Assignment 4 (Task 2)

S1	<p>Essay</p> <p>Macrogenre: Analytical Explanation + Exposition or Discussion</p> <p>Orientation ^ Element 1 ^ Analytical Explanation ^ Exemplification ^ Exemplification / Recount ^ Application ^ Critique ^ Element 2 ^ Analytical Explanation ^ Exemplification ^ Application ^ Reinforcement of position ^ Summary of reflection</p>
S4	<p>Essay</p> <p>Macrogenre: Analytical explanation + Exposition</p> <p>Orientation ^ Element 1 ^ Explanation ^ Element 2? ^ Explanation ^ Reinforcement of position</p>

Key findings: genre analysis

Comments on S1's and S4's academic writing development

- S1's writing moved from 'emerging' to almost 'established'
 - Academic writing development from more descriptive to analytical to discussion
 - More use of decontextualised language (early childhood studies concept-driven)
- S4's writing remaining consistent as 'emerging' but moving towards 'consolidating'
 - Academic writing development from more narrative and descriptive to analytical/ explanation
 - Still use of contextualised language (real-world events driven)

Conclusion, implications & future

- A focus on academic literacy to support students' confidence as writers.
- Common key academic literacy skills as concerns for students at this level
- Embedding = regularity, familiarity and integration with the subject
- Linkage of academic literacy activities with the assessment tasks essential
- A reviewable resource valued by students if they can return to it during study
- Gradual movement of students' academic writing development from descriptive to analytical to discussion
- Variation across students and dynamic development
- More research of this kind needed in different disciplines and levels to understand students' academic literacy trajectory.

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